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ABSTRACT

Three studies, involving 140 black third grade students reading below grade level, sought to determine whether dialect interference negatively affected reading comprehension. The first investigation found that a story could be repatterned to significantly reduce the number of miscues and minimize dialect interference between the student's oral language and the reading passage. The second investigation revealed that cloze comprehension scores were no better on the repatterned story than on the textbook story written in standard English. The third study found that the black students did not retell significantly more of the concepts and relations from the repatterned story when compared to the same story written in standard English. These results indicate that dialect did not interfere with comprehension, and that dialect miscues did not interfere with the construction of meaning. In view of the results and their implications, teachers should focus on the students' ability to construct meaning from print, minimizing those student dialect-based miscues that do not interfere with meaning. (Author/RL)

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Does Dialect Interference Negatively Affect Comprehension?

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The role of dialect interference in language and reading tasks has been the topic of numerous studies (Harber & Beatty, 1978). Some researchers have concluded that there is evidence of dialect interference when black children work with standard English language and reading tasks (Baratz, 1969; Bartel & Axelrod, 1973; Weber, 1973; Harber, 1977), while other researchers have concluded that there is no significant dialect interference (Nolen, 1972; Ramsey, 1972; Simons & Johnson, 1974; Kachuck, 1975; Liu, 1975-1976). In general, the role of dialect interference in language and reading tasks is unclear and some findings are contradictory (Harber & Beatty, 1978).

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One specific subtopic that has received only limited attention is the effects of Black English usage on reading comprehension. Harber and Beatty (1978) identified twenty-six studies on dialect interference and only four of these studies included reading comprehension as the major variable studied. One of these four investigations analyzed the effects of dialect interference by studying both oral reading miscues and oral comprehension with standard English and Black English materials (Harber, 1977). The other three investigations studied only silent comprehension with standard English and Black English materials and did not report information on whether the students' dialect based, oral reading miscues influenced comprehension (Nolen, 1972; Hockman, 1973; Marwit & Neumann, 1974). In summary, there is no clear answer to the question, "Does dialect interference, which appears to operate when Black English speaking children read standard English orally, negatively affect comprehension?" (Harber & Beatty, 1978). The purpose of the following investigations was to systematically study whether dialect interference negatively affects comprehension. The basic assumption of the studies was that if there is a minimal amount of interference between the student's oral language patterns and the reading passage, then students should be able to read with fewer miscues and have better comprehension.

Story Development

The first phase of the investigations was to revise a standard English, textbook story so that dialect interference would be minimized. The first two scenes from the play, "Jerome" (Ressner, 1973), was

chosen for revision because the difficulty level was appropriate for these low average, third year students, the students also responded positively to the content of the story, and the students could easily paraphrase a story written in play format.

The investigators decided to neutralize dialect differences (Harber & Bryen, 1976) rather than rewrite the textbook story in Black English. This decision was made because these students had been reading standard English for more than two years and were unfamiliar with an orthography that must be used for representation of Black English.

One third grade class was selected to assist the investigators with repatterning the story. This class was first asked to read the textbook story orally so that the oral reading miscues could be identified. The class was also asked to paraphrase the sentences from the textbook story to determine how the students would say each sentence using their own language. Using the information from the miscues and the paraphrased sentences, the story was rewritten so that the revised story and the textbook story were at the same readability level (2.1) according to the Spache Readability Formula (Spache, 1974).

The repatterning involved the following types of changes: present and past tense verb forms were changed to verb phrases introduced by modal auxiliaries; "-ing" forms of words were changed to marked infinitives; all contractions were changed into two words; single word adverbials, relative clauses, and subordinate clauses were omitted or revised; complex verb phrases were simplified; and selected words were substituted to make the vocabulary more compatible with the students' sociolinguistic environment.

The First Investigation

Two additional third grade classes from the same school (as the students who assisted with the repatterning) were used as the experimental population. The students' mean score on the Comprehension Test of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests: Primary C, was at the 12th percentile--grade equivalent = 2.3 (Gates & MacGinitie, 1965).

There were 48 students in the experimental population. Two students were eliminated from the total population because they could not read at the preprimer level and six others were randomly eliminated to make all cells equal in the research design.

Each student in the experimental population read the textbook story and the repatterned story with a week between the readings to allow for forgetting. The data were first analyzed to determine if there was an order effect relating to which story was read first and no order effect was found. The percent of words pronounced correctly was then analyzed using a 2 (type of story) x 2 (sex) x 3 (achievement level) analysis of variance. The mean percent of words pronounced correctly was 83.9 for the textbook story and 92.0 for the repatterned story. This difference was significant at the .001 level ($F = 146.102$). However, there was a significant interaction. The story type x level interaction (see Table 1) revealed that students in the lowest third of the experimental population made a significant improvement when they read the repatterned story (story type x level interaction $F = 27.560$).

Table 1

Percent of Words Pronounced Correctly

Level	% Textbook Story Correct	% Revised Story Correct	% Difference
Highest Third	94.9	98.2	+ 3.3
Middle Third	86.3	95.0	+ 8.7
Lowest Third	64.0	81.0	+17.0

The oral reading miscues of eight students from the low group were also analyzed using the nine questions from the Reading Miscue Inventory (Goodman and Burke, 1971). A chi-square test was used to analyze the students' strengths and weaknesses and the analysis did not reveal significant shifts for individual students in their basic reading strategies when miscues from the textbook story were compared to the miscues on the repatterned story. However, when the data from the eight students were pooled, significant differences were found for Graphic Similarity (.019) and Grammatical Acceptability (.039). Grammatical Function (.074) and Semantic Acceptability (.078) also came close to the .05 level of significance. The reader should also note that there was no significant difference for the Meaning Change question. In addition, it was interesting to find that the eight students made their 25th miscue when the repatterned story was 78 percent completed while their 25th miscue was made when the textbook story was only 59 percent completed. In short, the basic reading strategies of

these low students were not appreciably changed as a result of the repatterning, only the total number of miscues were reduced.

The Second Investigation

A second study was undertaken to determine if the students could comprehend the revised story better than the text story. A cloze comprehension test was developed by omitting every sixth word from the conversation portions of the two stories. This deletion pattern yielded a total of 36 cloze blanks for each story.

The population for this study was 72 third year students enrolled in the same school as the students from the first study. However, the second study was conducted one year after the first investigation with a different black student population. The average score for this population was at the 29th percentile--grade equivalent = 2.1--on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Level 1 (CTB-McGraw Hill, 1968).

Prior to the collection of the cloze data, the students did a practice cloze exercise by writing in words deleted from the "Happy Birthday Song". The students were then randomly given one of the two stories and told to write in the exact word that was taken out. When requested, the investigators assisted the students with the spelling of words.

Exact word cloze responses on the two stories were analyzed using a 2 (type of story) x 2 (sex) x 3 (achievement level) analysis of variance. The average number of words written in for the text story was 12.03 (33.4% correct) and 13.56 (37.7% correct) for the

revised story. The analysis of variance did not reveal a significant difference in performance for the two groups (F = 1.307). However, there were significant interactions for sex (F = 5.716) and level (F = 37.856). Girls (14.39) did significantly better than boys (11.17); and the lowest third of the students (on the California Test of Basic Skills) had the lowest cloze score (6.63), while the middle third (11.17) and the highest third (20.58) wrote in progressively more of the omitted words correctly. It was interesting to note that the type of story by level interaction found in the first investigation was not found in this investigation.

The Third Investigation

The next investigation was undertaken to determine if a more detailed analysis of comprehension would find significant differences in the level of comprehension between the textbook story and the re-patterned story. The first scene from the textbook and the re-patterned stories were used for this analysis. Carl Frederiksen's (1975) network of logical and semantic structures was used to compare the concepts and relations in the stories with the concepts and relations in the students' retellings.

Twenty, low average, third year, non-standard speaking, black students were the subjects for this investigation. Low average students were selected because the first investigation showed that the low average students' performance was improved when they read the revised story. It was hypothesized that if there would be a significant difference in comprehension, it would be most likely that this difference

would be significant with a low average population. The average performance of the 20 students on the Stanford Achievement Test, Primary II, Comprehension subtests (given at the end of the previous school year) was at the 20th percentile--Grade Equivalent = 2.1.

Since each of the two groups in this study would include only ten students, group equivalency was important. Equal numbers of boys and girls were chosen for each group and the students were randomly assigned to story type. Scaled score performance on the Stanford Achievement Test, Primary II, Comprehension subtests was analyzed to determine if there was a significant difference between the two groups. This ANOVA test revealed that the two groups were not significantly different on the SAT Comprehension subtests.

Procedures for this study were: directions were given for reading the story orally including what the student was to do when s/he came to an unknown word, the student read the story orally, the student counted to ten after the reading to minimize the effects of short term memory, and the students retold the story. All responses were tape recorded.

Numerous probes were given during the retellings. The average number of probes was five. The investigator probed until the student did not respond with any new content on two consecutive probes. All of the probes were non-leading such as: ". . . and", "Can you tell me anything more?" and "Do you remember anything else?"

The average oral reading performance of the students who read the text story was 90.9% correct and 95.8% of the words were pronounced correctly by the students who read the repatterned story. Since comprehension was the focus of this investigation, a second subjective

analysis of the miscues was made. The percent of miscues that caused meaning loss for the students who read the textbook story was 5.5% and was 1.4% for the student who read the repatterned story.

A Frederiksen (1975) analysis was used for comparison of the two retellings. To do this, the concepts and relations identified in each story were compared with the concepts and relations identified in each student's retelling. One point was given for each concept and relation that matched the corresponding text story. The two concepts and relations compared were: concepts and relations explicitly included in the retelling and in the story (explicit), and concepts and relations inferred in the retelling from the story (implicit). Since there was an unequal number of concepts and relations between the two stories, raw scores from the explicit data were translated to a proportionate ratio. Since there was an infinite number of concepts and relations for the implicit categories, raw scores were used for this analysis. The mean results for the two stories are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Concepts and Relations Raw Scores for the Two Stories

Type	Text Story	Repatterned Story
Explicit	53.1	57.4
Implicit	35.0	39.3

These data were compared using an analysis of variance. Each of the two tests (Explicit F = 1.183, Implicit F = .150) was not

significant when the recalls from the text story was compared to the recalls from the repatterned story.

Summary and Conclusions

Three black, low average, third grade population were used to answer the question, "Does dialect interference negatively affect comprehension?" The first investigation found that a story could be repatterned to significantly reduce the number of miscues and minimize dialect interference between the student's oral language and the reading passage. The second investigation revealed that cloze comprehension scores were no better on the repatterned story than on the textbook story written in standard English. The third study found that the black students did not retell significantly more of the concepts and relations from the repatterned story when compared to the same story written in standard English. In short, this series of investigations agrees with the findings of Nolan (1972), Hockman (1973), and Merwit and Neuman (1974) who investigated the effects of dialect on silent comprehension and concluded that dialect did not interfere with comprehension. The findings of this study also support Goodman's and Buck's (1973) conclusion that dialect involved miscues do not interfere with the construction of meaning, since they move to the reader's own language.

An applied issue in this study has been the teacher's reaction to the black student's dialect based miscues. Cunningham (1973) found that teachers respond differentially to black-dialect-specific miscues and would correct a significantly higher number of these miscues. The

findings of this study support Cunningham's suggestion that teachers need to be adequately trained to understand the dialects of the children they teach and recognize the meaning equivalents in standard English. In conclusion, classroom teachers should focus on the student's ability to construct meaning from print and minimize correction of the student's dialect based miscues that do not interfere with meaning.

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